

Legislative Assembly of Alberta



CANADIANA

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Fact Sheet No. 5

You and Your MLA

We elect our Members of the Legislative Assembly to represent us at the provincial level. To represent means, above all, to communicate.

When the Legislature is in session, MLAs earn a part of their living with their voices: making the views of their constituents known by introducing legislation and debating and discussing concerns with other members. To represent you in the Assembly, your MLA communicates your concerns to other elected members and to various government departments.

But that is only a small part of your MLA's role as your representative. MLAs perform most of their duties in their constituencies, out of sight of cameras and reporters. Here MLAs earn their living with their ears, listening to the problems, questions, ideas, and opinions of the people who elected them.

Who is Represented?

If you are not eligible to vote, or if you are but chose not to vote in the last election, or if you did vote and your candidate was defeated, you may wonder whether your MLA would even represent you if you had a concern. But MLAs represent all of their constituents, whether they are children, people receiving social assistance, people wishing to start a business, people with ideas, people with worries, people of any political stripe.

So your MLA is your representative whether or not you voted or for whom.

MLAs are often called upon to help their constituents with individual problems. Whether you are a farmer with a concern about crop insurance, a businessperson needing funds for an expansion, a senior citizen with a question about a pension, or a worker applying for workers' compensation benefits, your MLA is willing to help you. Often this role is simply a matter of directing you to the people most qualified to deal with your particular concern, but your MLA may even become an advocate for you if your own attempts to solve a problem have been unsuccessful.

MLAs also deal with special-interest groups. If you belong to a group concerned about the environment, child care, health, drunk driving, education, or any other important issue, your group may want to meet with your MLA and ask that your cause be taken up, whether through legislation, a resolution in the Assembly, a letter to a government department, or otherwise. MLAs from other constituencies may also be able to assist you.

It is not uncommon for constituents to contact cabinet ministers as well as their own MLAs. Cabinet ministers are MLAs who are in charge of specific government departments and thus in a position to change departmental policies and programs. You may also want to talk to an MLA from one of the other parties. Individual opposition MLAs are critics of various government departments; the health critics, for example,

keep the policies of the Department of Health before the public eye and suggest policy alternatives.

Taking a Stand

Of course, no MLA can reflect the views of all constituents because people's opinions are never unanimous. MLAs often have to take sides; which side they take depends mainly on how their constituents feel about the issue and the needs of the constituency as a whole. Personal beliefs and party platforms also help to determine the position MLAs take on an issue.

MLAs listen to constituents' opinions and try to determine how the majority view a given issue. Through public meetings, day-to-day contact, and local media forums, MLAs gather information from as many constituents as possible. They then discuss the issue in private meetings with other MLAs from the same party; these are called caucus meetings. The caucus members decide as a group what their party's position will be, and voting in the Legislature tends to be along party lines according to the decision taken in caucus. But if some MLAs feel that the caucus position does not reflect what their constituents want or that it would not be beneficial to their constituencies, they can, and sometimes do, speak against the position of their caucus.

Your Participation is Vital

So that your MLA can represent you effectively, you must do your part. One of your obligations as a constituent is to be informed. Not every issue is going to interest you, of course, but if a policy or issue is important to you, learn as much as you can about it before

approaching your MLA. Sometimes just unearthing basic facts can help you to come up with your own ideas or solutions to problems. MLAs rely on their constituents for information and ideas, and your MLA will want you to share yours.

If you are eligible to vote at election time, by all means do so. But first find out as much as you can about each candidate's position so that you can choose the one who most closely reflects how you feel about issues that are important to you. If you never intend to contact your MLA or work for a political party, voting may be your only input into the democratic process.

Getting in Touch

If you need to find out who your MLA is, check your telephone directory under the heading "Government of Alberta" or call the Legislative Assembly Office at 427-2580. They will advise you of your MLA's address and telephone number.

If your concern is not urgent, write your MLA, stating your question or position as completely as you can. If you feel your concern requires immediate attention, however, you may telephone your MLA at the Legislature or at the constituency of-

fice during regular office hours. You may also want to write or phone the appropriate cabinet minister or opposition critics.

MLAs strive to be available, accessible, and accountable to their constituents. These objectives are reached through open communication between you, the constituent, and your MLA.

